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ABSTRACT

In today's poor economic climate, there is an acute need to coalesce the fragments of research related to student attrition into a systematic program for increasing the chances of student success. Such a unifying program can be visualized on a continuum of retention strategies ranging from impersonal administrative actions to more complicated, interpersonal interventions designed to increase student motivation. The 12 strategies on the continuum call for appropriate members of the college community to: eliminate bureaucratic barriers within the college's organizational structure; (2) eliminate rigid policies that intimidate students or decrease their motivation; (3) encourage student participation in college affairs; (4) develop placement procedures that assess both the student's knowledge and preferred learning style; (5) utilize a variety of instructional techniques; (6) implement flexible grading systems to accommodate varying learning rates among students; (7) help students formulate educational goals through an advisement system; (8) insist that staff understand the customer relationship of the student to the college; (9) increase student out-of-class contact with faculty; (10) maintain student interest in class participation; (11) stimulate the student's intellect; and (12) insure that students know they are valued. This continuum helps allocate responsibility for student retention among the college staff and provides a framework for retention activities. (JP)

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AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL FOR
RETENTION STRATEGIES

by

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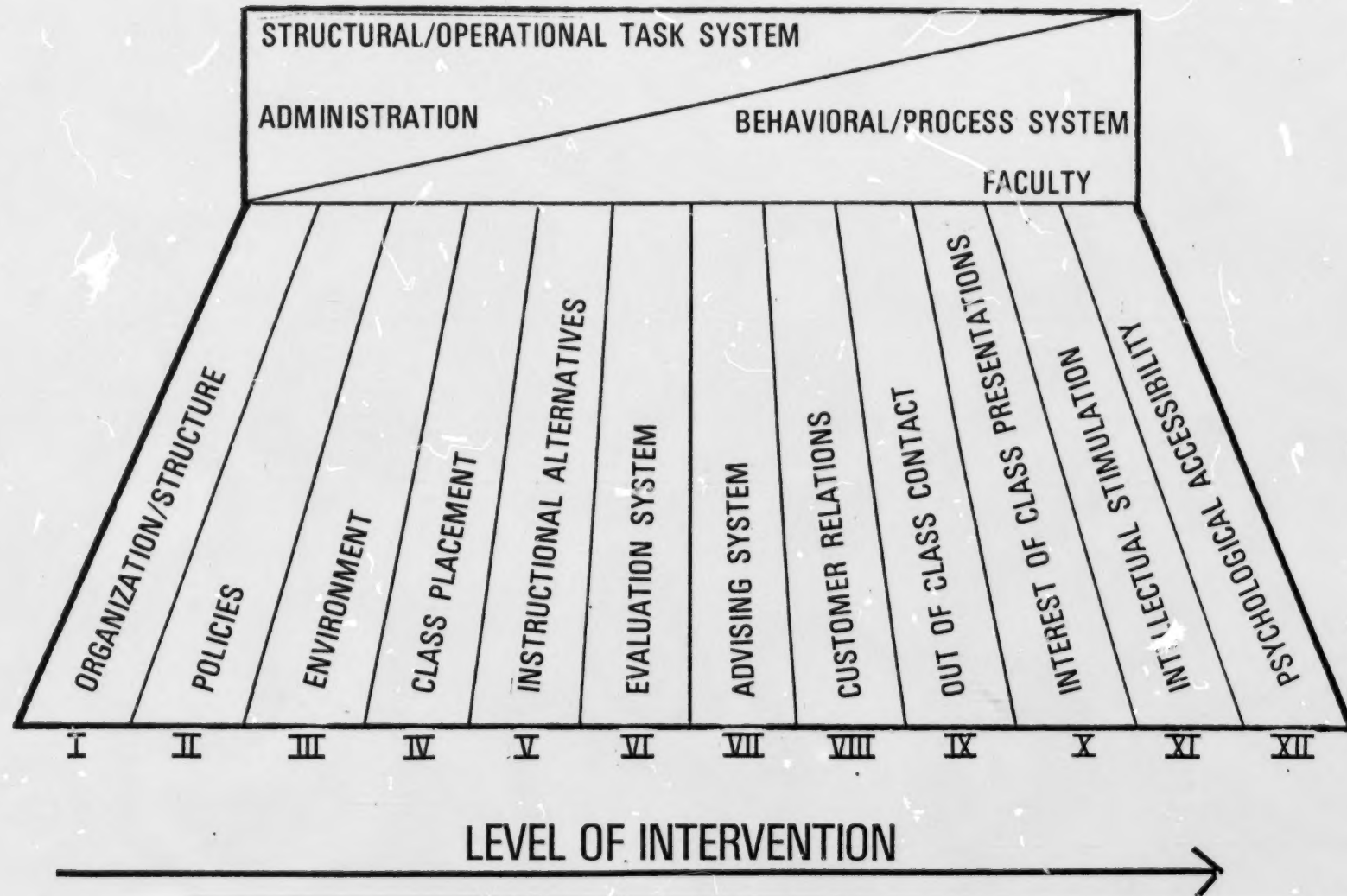
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AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL FOR
RETENTION STRATEGIES

Concerned educators have always been interested in student success. The only thing new about the current retention craze is the added pressures of economics. Suddenly it is not enough to be merely concerned or study variables which contribute to student attrition or even develop programs which increase student retention in pilot programs. The need is now much more pervasive; we must develop a total integrated approach--an approach that can coalesce the fragments of researched knowledge into systematic program implementation.

My own frustration with this need ultimately led to an adaptation of an organizational model proposed by Richard J. Selfridge and Stanley L. Sokolik. The model provides a visual analysis of successive responsibility for implementation. The arrangement is a continuum of increasing depth ranging from fairly simple mechanics to the most sensitive areas of student/teacher interaction. My choice of intervention strategies is an attempt to include the major areas which research has shown to effect retention. The continuum is also organized in a manner that can be compared to Herzberg's theory of motivation with the "hygiene" factors on the left moving toward the "motivator" factors on the right. While the choice of specific areas or their order may be questioned, I believe the model at least provides an adaptive framework for action.

AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF RETENTION STRATEGIES



Level I - Organizational Structure

The organization of most community colleges bears a striking resemblance to the traditional hierarchical structure of the university. Reporting functions and even the physical location of offices are designed for efficient administrative function. A survey of students on almost any campus will produce horror stories of negotiating the bureaucratic runaround. Of course, those students interviewed represent the survivors who may possess a level of systems sophistication and perseverance that is not typical of the "non-traditional" community college student. Careful analysis should reveal areas of structure and organization that can be changed to reduce these barriers to students without destroying the bureaucracy.

Level II - Policies

The process of policy development on the college campus is additive, always adding to existing policy but never removing those policies that are no longer viable. The reasons for this phenomenon are many, but one factor is the tendency for policy to be developed as a result of very narrow departmental concern. Rarely is the totality of policy reviewed, particularly in light of absolute need and the effect on students. Yet an open door institution which hopes to increase student retention must be willing to exist with the discomfort of minimum policy and flexible interpretation. Rigidity diminishes the motivation of the veteran student and destroys the motivation of the frightened neophyte.

Level III - Environment

Community colleges should be places that invite student participation, not just in the student center but in other important areas

where students need to feel free to interact with faculty and staff. The research of Wilson, Gaff, and others published in their book, College Professors and Their Impact on Students (1975) identifies this interaction as one of the most important elements for student satisfaction. But the possibility of personal interaction (Level IX) is often greatly reduced by an architectural environment that communicates the opposite of free access.

Level IV - Class Placement

Assuring the accurate placement of students in beginning classes has long dominated the retention literature. Certainly this is still a crucial challenge, for now we not only have to be concerned with assessing the student's prerequisite knowledge, but we also need to be concerned with helping the student choose an appropriate instructional strategy. Far too often courses are designed to be taught in a variety of modes without any attention given to determining which students are most likely to profit from a given technique. The solution to the placement problem will require careful local selection, evaluation, and refinement of achievement and cognitive style instruments. It is also necessary to develop a process of assessment that is humane and sensitive.

Level V - Instructional Strategies

Patricia Cross has effectively articulated the need for "student centered learning", a concept which obviously requires the development of a variety of instructional strategies (Cross, 1979). While the direct relationship of instructional strategy and retention has not been established, the development of a variety of methods for structuring the

learning environment is at least a logical outgrowth of the established fact that students learn differently. Creating a learning environment geared toward meeting the learning needs of students may even be compared to fulfilling the security needs identified by Maslow. Frederick Herzberg has also identified lack of security as a factor in attrition.

Level VI - Evaluation Systems

Flexible learning environments require a flexible evaluation system. Few things in education make less sense than expecting every student to be able to learn the same amount of material within the same period of time. The student who starts behind, works hard, and learns a great deal is still liable to be rewarded with a very low grade. However, if the material to be learned is structured in successive units, the student can be evaluated in a manner that is consistent with his progress. Grading will become a reward system that has meaning and relevance.

Level VII - Advising System

Students who have goals tend to stay. A recent study completed by Delta College in University Center, Michigan found a significant difference in students who stay and students who do not. Eighty-two percent of the "staying" students had a degree goal as compared to only fifty-four percent who continued without a degree goal. Certainly, seeking a degree is not the only measure of students' goals. Even so, it is fairly safe to assume that many students have poorly developed reasons for enrolling in a community college. An advising system that helps students develop goals has to be much more than a once-a-semester crash counseling session prior to registration. It must be an integrated program where every staff

member looks for ways to relate the process of learning to the reality of living.

Level VIII - Customer Relations

Level VIII begins the movement into areas that are primarily concerned with increasing the impact of personal interactions between staff and students. Students interact with college personnel continually and each one of these interactions communicates an attitude that is either conducive or destructive to a "staying" environment. Each staff member should be encouraged to adopt the understanding of the customer relationship of students to the colleges.

Level IX - Out-of-Class Contact

The single most important factor Wilson identified as contributing to student satisfaction is the amount of out-of-class contact with an influential faculty member. In their previously quoted book, they identify the following statements which characterized these contacts. The percentages represent the combination of "quite descriptive" and "very descriptive" responses.

The influential faculty member

...was available and open to my discussion.	81%
...stimulated me intellectually.	81%
...helped me feel confident of my own abilities.	72%
...demanded high quality work.	69%
...interested me in his/her field.	65%
...encouraged me to inspect my values.	43%
...advised me about my career plans.	38%
...made me aware of social issues.	34%
...counseled me about personal problem.	19%
...helped me get a job or scholarship.	18%

The exciting observation drawn was twofold. First, the top-ranking statements represent exactly what the professors hoped they were

accomplishing, and second, the amount of out-of-class contact is a behavior which is easily identified and can therefore be modified.

(Wilson, et al. 1975, pp. 131-133)

Level X - Interest of Class Presentations

The level of student interest is in part determined by how we present the material. Even though this is an important factor identified in the study on the impact of college professors, it doesn't take formal research to remember our personal response to boring lectures or poorly produced materials in an "individualized" program. The antidote is one part openness to honest critique combined with an equal dose of professional assistance in material preparation.

Level XI - Intellectual Stimulation

The key to stimulating students' intellect is not well researched or understood, yet each one of us can remember some professors who stimulated our intellect. Maybe it had to do with their ability to tap some personal relevancy, or maybe it was their own fervor and passion for learning.

Level XII - Psychological Accessibility

Perhaps the deepest and most difficult of all the behavioral interventions is psychological openness. If students do not feel we genuinely care about their point of view, then interaction with students will have little motivating effect. The cues we give students are subtle but powerful. Students are tuned to these messages and will rarely proceed beyond formalities without a clear match between the verbal message and the subtle cues of accessibility.

SUMMARY

The intent of this model is not to prescribe specific intervention strategies. The intent is to suggest a framework for organizing a holistic approach to the problems of student attrition. The model also demonstrates the feasibility of organizing the approach in a systematic manner ranging from fairly easily manipulated mechanics to the most sensitive areas of student/faculty interaction. Additionally, the model visually displays an approximation of primary responsibility.

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